

Congregation's 1st rabbi felt 'called' to Duxbury

By Judith Montminy
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUXBURY - At sundown on Oct. 1, when the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashonah) begins, Rabbi Judith Epstein will, as she puts it, conduct her first High Holy Services from "beginning to end."

Although she was ordained four years ago, the new religious leader of Congregation Shirat Hayam said she did not set out to be "a pulpit rabbi."

"I wasn't even looking for a congregation," said Rabbi Epstein, 56, who was hired this summer by the young Duxbury congregation. "I intended to . . . work with college students and do a lot of interfaith counseling."

Instead, she will be the first year-round religious leader of the congregation, which is barely a year old, and she will conduct monthly Sabbath services and life cycle events throughout the year. Last year the fledgling congregation imported a rabbi for the high holy days. Members conducted Sabbath services, as they will continue to do when the rabbi is not in Duxbury.

With a doctorate in Jewish education and 20 years' experience as education director for the Greater Hartford Jewish Federation, Rabbi Epstein studied to become a rabbi after a divorce six years ago. She planned to build a rabbinical practice around counseling, adult education, and performing life cycle events.

All that changed last spring when she followed her intuition and issued a last-minute Passover Seder invitation to a Christian acquaintance and his wife. During the service in her home, the two guests asked a question that prompted Rabbi Epstein to consult the Boston Jewish Advocate. The guests then scanned the newspaper and noticed a classified ad for a part-time rabbi in Duxbury.

"Judy, I want you to apply for this job," the male guest said. "It's right for you."

Rabbi Epstein said she resisted at first but eventually applied for the Duxbury position. The part-time nature of the job appealed to her since it left room for her counseling practice, which centers on interfaith couples. By the time the board of directors had finished interviewing a dozen finalists, Rabbi Epstein received a unanimous vote of approval.

"It couldn't be a more perfect match," said Harry Katz of Duxbury, the congregation's vice president. "We were looking for a very liberal, open-thinking rabbi."

Katz said Congregation Shirat Hayam permits interfaith weddings.

"Unlike other congregations, we truly accept the interfaith families into our congregation," said Fred Kugel, the synagogue's president. "We as a congregation welcome interfaith families. We as a congregation support interfaith families. They serve on our board of directors. Interfaith members were founders. It is important not to turn our backs on an interfaith family that wants to practice Judaism."

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HARRY KATZ
Vice president,
Congregation Shirat Hayam

Duxbury's new rabbi changed paths

■ RABBI

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More than half of the membership - 42 families - are interfaith couples.

Both Katz and Kugel said Rabbi Epstein's experience with interfaith counseling was a key factor in hiring her, as was her extensive experience in Jewish education. Her designation as a Reconstructionist rabbi also was attractive. Reconstructionism is one of four major Jewish movements. Its definition of Judaism combines history, the arts, culture, and language with religion. And while attention is paid to customs, an often repeated Reconstructionist saying is: "Tradition has a vote, but not a veto."

Rabbi Epstein sees her role with the new congregation as that of a guide, helping the group define itself and chart its path in response to members' needs and to help them develop a sense of connectedness to Judaism and the history and culture of the Jewish people. Although she was brought up in the Orthodox tradition and had been a member of a Conservative congregation most of her life, she finds Reconstructionism aligns itself more with her personal philosophy and approach to religion.

"Rabbis do not usually speak of being 'called' to a congregation," Rabbi Epstein said. "Despite that fact, in some real way, I feel myself 'called' to Congregation Shirat Hayam. ... This is a community looking for a spiritual leader, and

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RABBI JUDITH EPSTEIN

I'm a spiritual leader looking for a community."

Since Rabbi Epstein lives an hour away in Manchester-by-the-Sea, she plans to spend one weekend a month in Duxbury for Sabbath services, as well come for the High Holy Days (Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur) and for the 10 bar mitzvah services this year.

As she discussed her new position and evolving role with the Duxbury congregation, Rabbi Epstein offered warm smiles and welcoming handshakes to members who introduced themselves during an open house earlier this month at the Duxbury Grange, where the congregation holds its services.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DOMINIC CHAVEZ

One little girl rushed by and called out, "Hi, Rabbi Judy."

The new rabbi smiled and said "Hello," then turned to a visitor to explain that the first-name style began last year with the rabbi who came in for High Holy Days.

"They say they are 'South Shore casual,'" Rabbi Epstein said of the congregation.

The style is new for her, but one she quickly embraces in this season of new beginnings.

► For more information about Congregation Shirat Hayam, call (781) 582-2700.